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Places where people matter: The marketing dynamics of Fairtrade Towns

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how Fairtrade Towns, a relatively new but rapidly expanding phenomenon that promotes social business in terms of the consumption of Fairtrade products, operate as a form of place-based marketing network. This paper, which underpinned a Keynote Address delivered at the *Second Biannual Social Business Conference*, explores how Fairtrade Towns combine the ‘people’ dimension of Fairtrade marketing with a place-based perspective.

Methodology

This project applied grounded theory and gathered data through long-term ethnographic involvement in one Fairtrade Town initiative, and interviews with 29 key participants across 11 other Fairtrade Towns.

Findings

The dynamics of Fairtrade Towns operating as marketing systems went far beyond just conventional ethical consumption behaviours driven by concerns for other people in other places. Elements of consumer citizenship linked to civic engagement, the exploitation and development of local social networks and social capital, and connections with local place identity all combine to create a form of place-based community marketing with a unique ability to connect people in producer and consumer communities for social benefit.

Contribution

This study demonstrates the need to understand phenomena such as Fairtrade Towns, not as abstract marketing systems, but as activities and processes driven by, and concerned about, real people in real places. It contributes to the growing appreciation of the need to understand particular aspects of social business from a multidisciplinary perspective.

Keywords: Fairtrade, Ethical marketing, Consumer citizenship, Place marketing, Grounded theory

Places where people matter: The marketing dynamics of Fairtrade Towns

INTRODUCTION – PEOPLE IN MARKETING

The theme of the Second Annual Social Business Conference, “*Business as if People Matter*”, is one that those in the marketing discipline are likely to feel they have strongly covered. After all, the underlying philosophy of marketing puts the customer (usually a consumer, but also potentially an organizational buyer) and their needs at the heart of the marketing strategy process. One could however argue that the original conception of the customer as consumer is not as a whole ‘person’ but as a partial representation that emphasises particular attributes, focuses on one particular need that they have at a time, and is principally interested only in purchase as a behaviour and customer satisfaction (preferably leading to repeat purchases) as an outcome. This narrow profile of the consumer as *Homo Economicus* was expanded when Philip Kotler articulated the idea of ‘societal marketing’ in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Societal marketing went beyond the traditional neo-classical economics focus on satisfying the individual desires of consumers at a profit. Instead Kotler (1972) argued that we need to consider long-run consumer welfare to tackle the individual and collective consequences of consumption ranging from the damage caused by alcohol, smoking and junk food to individuals, to the collective impacts linked to car use and excessive packaging. With societal marketing consumers evolved from being principally a means of consumption, to become more tangible beings with bodies and lives that could be damaged by the consequences of consumption, and who existed as members of society as well as of markets.

Another step towards recognizing participants in marketing systems as actual people came with the increasing concerns about ethical issues in marketing and the rise of ‘ethical marketing’, a process begun in the sixties by authors including Patterson (1966) and Bartels (1967). In reviewing the key ethical issues in marketing, Laczniak and Murphy (2006, p.157) argue that a distinguishing feature of ethical marketing is that it “*puts people first*”. This involves ensuring that marketing activities create perceived and real social benefits, and consider a range of stakeholders and their wellbeing in relation to marketing decisions, activities and outcomes.

The stakeholder emphasis of ethical marketing allowed other types of people to come into greater focus within marketing discourse. This included considering the welfare of those people who drive our marketing systems forward such as the hard-pressed front-line service

delivery staff dealing with unhappy customers, or the telesales staff locked away in a call centre. This recognition of the operational importance of people, particularly with the growing interest in services marketing as a sub-discipline, was recognised in attempts to extend McCarthy's (1960) classic "*Four Ps*" marketing mix with 'people' as an additional P factor (Booms and Bitner, 1981) .

Another set of people whose welfare was encompassed by the emergence of ethical marketing are those responsible for production activities throughout a given company's supply chain. Through the process of ethical consumption the interests of the consumer as the original focus of marketing thinking, have intersected with the comparatively new (for marketing) concern for the welfare of producers as stakeholders. The result is increasing concern amongst people in their role as consumers about ethical issues relating to the working conditions and lives of other people as producers. This concern tends to focus particularly on the freedom and pay of workers in poorer countries, the use of child labour, and perceived environmental damage and the resulting impact on peoples' welfare (O'Rourke 2012).

Over time it is possible to discern increasing depth of concern about people, and a broadening range of social and ethical issues being considered, both in scholarship about marketing systems and their practical management. However, there is a tendency, particularly in marketing scholarship, to consider people in an abstract and collective way. When marketers talk about 'the consumer' they are talking about a type, and when talking about 'the market' they refer to an abstract collection of consumers. In relation to the treatment of other stakeholders, such as the workers within supply chains, the tendency also is to consider them in abstract and collective ways. However, ethical consumption (and therefore ethical marketing activity that addresses the needs of ethical consumers) does begin to encourage a more specific view of such stakeholders. Avoidance of child labour identifies a slightly more specific type of a person as a stakeholder for consideration, and the emphasis on those in poorer countries introduces a further idea of considering people more specifically in terms of particular places.

PLACE IN MARKETING

Like 'people', 'place' can be viewed as a central concept in the evolution of marketing. One could argue that the roots of 'modern marketing' lie in the industrialisation of the 19th century, and particularly in the geographical separation of buyers and sellers into different

places. As consumption and production moved towards mass and international markets, so producers and sellers became less likely to know their buyers personally or be able to communicate with them directly. Marketing, through activities such as research, distribution and marketing communications, acts to bridge the resulting distance. It is perhaps telling that when marketing emerged as an academic discipline at the start of the twentieth century it had a strong emphasis on the distributive trades and the importance of retailing, wholesaling, distribution and import/export (Bartels, 1988). The 'place' variable is also embedded within the marketing mix as one of McCarthy's (1960) enduringly memorable, if much criticized, "*Four Ps*".

The conventional understanding of place in marketing is often limited to considering distribution and retailing as relatively abstract logistical and economic phenomena, rather than as something rooted in actual places within which people live, produce and consume. Quelch and Jocz (2012) observe that place is often presented as last in line within the marketing mix, which they argue acts to reduce marketing opportunities. This is not to say that marketing strategy development ignores actual places. They will be considered when planning salesforce territories, calculating distribution costs, accounting for cultural variations between countries or trying to understand how climate and topography impacts consumer preferences. Quelch and Jocz (2012) in "*All Business is Local*" argue that local sensitivity, local customization and building strong customer relationships in each place of operation are essential for even the most global company. Despite this, marketing scholarship continues to focus mostly on abstract rather than concrete notions of place, and research into specific-to-place and specifically place-based marketing, remains comparatively rare. The main emphasis of studies into specific-to-place marketing is either on the impact of place of origin for certain products such as wine or cheese (Thode & Maskulka, 1998), or place branding, particularly for tourism destinations (Ward, 1998).

FAIRTRADE MARKETING – CONCERNING PEOPLE IN FARAWAY PLACES

The emergence and growth of Fairtrade marketing over recent decades represents a key success story of ethical consumption and of a concern for people who aren't consumers within marketing systems. It has grown from a relatively fringe and alternative market niche to become a market worth over £5 billion across Western Europe and the USA, with the UK's share standing at over £1.8 billion generated by over 4000 different Fairtrade products (Doherty, Davies & Tranchell, 2013). This growth has seen the market progress through

several distinct phases (Doherty et al., 2013; Golding & Peattie, 2005; Nicholls & Opal, 2005) which can be summarised as:

1. Goodwill selling: in which comparatively low quality products were sold through alternative channels with a proposition based mainly on social solidarity;
2. Commercialization: based on improvements in product quality, packaging, branding and increasing the availability of Fairtrade products through mainstream as well as alternative channels;
3. New marketing: with an emphasis on increasing the scale of the Fairtrade market through greater market penetration and widespread availability including the adoption by mass market brands.

Whether or not this evolution of Fairtrade, and the emphasis on ‘mainstreaming’ in particular, has reduced or increased the emphasis on the people dimension of the Fairtrade marketing system is open to debate. One interpretation is that the mainstreaming process has created a focus on issues like branding, packaging, product quality and distribution which has shifted attention away from the emphasis on ethics and social solidarity that typified the goodwill selling era. An alternative perspective is that a key turning point that enabled Fairtrade to enter into mainstream markets was a shift in the tone of the discourse (Low & Davenport, 2005, 2007), by moving away from the early term ‘alternative trade’ to use the more contemporary ‘fair trade’. They argue that ‘fair’ is a more inclusive term which mainstream consumers are likely to have a greater understanding of, and affinity with. It moves us from a relatively abstract concept of alternative trading systems to a simpler and more familiar notion of fairness, within which people matter.

That Fairtrade emphasises fairness is obvious (not least from the name), and the core idea is to provide a ‘fair’ price to producers that both covers their basic production and living costs and includes a development premium to allow for community investment. However, there are other activities and outcomes related to the Fairtrade accreditation standards which go beyond the relatively abstract concept of price as another marketing mix variable. These include reforming market structures through direct purchasing from producers and transparency in trading partnerships (Nichols & Opal, 2005); basic environmental standards including issues like the protection of biodiversity (Jaffee, 2007; Perez-Suiero, 2006); and efforts to improve management practices including through the provision of better market information to producers (Nichols & Opal, 2005). Fairtrade also considers worker welfare in

relation to labour standards commitments, including provision for democratic workforce organisation and empowerment (Jaffee, 2007; Nichols & Opal, 2005), and safe, non-exploitative working conditions (Jaffee, 2007). Fairtrade also has an emphasis on the empowerment of women as a particular type of producer (Perez-Suiero, 2006), which may help to explain why the Fairtrade Foundation emphasises that 23% of the producers involved are women. From a producer community perspective, better living conditions, community solidarity and the preservation of traditional cultures are also potentially beneficial outcomes (Perez-Suiero, 2006). The ethos of the Fairtrade Movement is captured by Nicholls & Opal (2005, p.6) as follows: *“The aim of Fair trade is to offer the most disadvantaged producers in developing countries the opportunity to move out of extreme poverty through creating market access (typically to Northern consumers) under beneficial rather than exploitative terms. The objective is to empower producers to develop their own business and wider communities through international trade.”* In other words people, as producers, matter, as do the places (environments and communities) of production, and finally consumers also matter because it is their willingness to respond to the Fairtrade proposition that the entire movement depends upon.

For Fairtrade marketers, ensuring that their marketing communication efforts go beyond the issue of paying farmers a fair price for their commodities is viewed as important for the movement (Davies, et al. 2010; Raynolds, Murray & Wilkinson, 2007). This will ensure that the Fairtrade message retains its emphasis on the transformative and developmental aspects of a trading system that has people and the environment at its core. As Arnold (2009, p.131) notes: *“Fairtrade is the number one ethical value that the new consumer relates to because it’s about people. No matter how cold we can be, most of us feel for others.”*

However, as the Fairtrade movement has become increasingly mainstreamed it has proved challenging to maintain the emphasis on the people within supply chains, rather than on relatively abstract concepts relating to prices and markets. Low & Davenport (2005, 2007) and Davies, Doherty & Knox (2010) raise concerns that the developmental qualities of Fairtrade are becoming increasingly secondary to the message about a fair price. Moore, Gibbon & Slack (2006) also warn that mainstreaming could lead to the Fairtrade message being lost or becoming perceived as a minor form of product augmentation. This could result in Fairtrade consumption becoming merely a ‘lifestyle choice’ with little real meaning or substance resonating with the consumer (Golding, 2009). The challenge for the future of the

Fairtrade movement is to ensure that its developmental message relating to the welfare and development of people in far-away places remains in focus for consumers.

Fairtrade producers have actively sought to maintain the people focus and developmental message through their marketing communications and other activities. The mission statement for the Day Chocolate Company (producers of *Divine*) for example is: “*To grow a successful global farmer-owned chocolate company using the amazing power of chocolate to delight and engage, and bring people together to create dignified trading relations, thereby empowering producers and consumers*”. An important ‘people’ based dimension of Fairtrade marketing communications is the emphasis on the personal stories of producers. Products like *Café Direct* coffee (Davies, et al. 2010) and *Divine* chocolate (Golding, 2009) have used individual producer stories for on-pack promotion, within pack promotion (only visible once the packaging is opened) and web-based information resources for consumers and other stakeholders. Such individual producer stories are seen as important in terms of building an emotional connection between consumers and producers (Alexander & Nicholls, 2006). Connolly and Shaw (2006) view the degree of emphasis on producer stories as a unique feature of the Fairtrade brand, and something that is not reflected in conventional products, or in such depth for other ethically or environmentally orientated products

FAIRTRADE TOWNS - FAIRTRADE CONSUMPTION IN PLACE

The Fairtrade movement has existed in some form for over 40 years, and it can be viewed as place orientated since there is considerable emphasis on the impact of Fairtrade marketing systems on the welfare of producer communities and their quality of life (Geiger-Oneto & Arnould, 2011). Fairtrade towns (FTTs) are a comparatively recent development within the Fairtrade movement, which complement the focus on producer communities with one on places of consumption. It began in the UK in September 2001 with the accreditation of Garstang, Lancashire as the world’s first FTT that met the five key accreditation principles developed by the Fairtrade Foundation (with specific targets for availability established in relation to population size):

1. The local council must pass a resolution supporting Fairtrade;
2. A range of Fairtrade products must be readily available in a town or city’s shops;
3. Fairtrade products must be used by a number of local work places;

4. The council must attract popular support for the campaign;
5. A local Fairtrade Steering Group must be convened to ensure the continued development of Fairtrade retailing and consumption within the town.

The principle of accrediting a place of consumption according to its levels of, and support for, the consumption of a type of product, rather than accrediting a product or service according to its nature or place of production, was both novel and controversial. It began with the efforts of a small group of people in Garstang, led by Bruce Crowther, who systematically lobbied local retail outlets, organisations and public services to stock and consume Fairtrade products (Alexander & Nicholls, 2006). After that they progressed to lobbying the Fairtrade Foundation to adopt the concept of Fairtrade accreditation for towns (and other places like cities), and ultimately succeeded. The emphasis in FTTs was the mobilisation of various ‘ordinary people’ (Malpass et al. 2007), the civic authority (Barnett et al., 2011) and various local organisations to actively promote Fairtrade. Crowther’s initial vision was based on an understanding that consumption could be viewed beyond the traditional neo-liberal paradigm and its emphasis on the individual consumer. In terms of market development, people matter, particularly when they act collectively.

From their beginnings in Garstang, the FTT concept has spread rapidly. By mid-2015 the number of accredited UK towns involved had reached 612 with over 1,000 more established in 25 other countries (Fairtrade Towns, 2015). Despite their rapid growth and real world success, Fairtrade Towns remain relatively under-researched, particularly from a marketing perspective. The main research approaches adopted so far in seeking to understand FTT include:

- Discussing FTTs as a form of marketing network (Nicholas & Opal, 2005);
- A place-based perspective exploration by Malpass et al. (2007) with a particular focus on local/global relations;
- Wheeler’s (2012) sociological exploration of one UK FTT with a primary emphasis on Fairtrade support/consumption as a form of social practice; and
- Lyon (2014) who considers US FTTs from a political economy perspective with a focus on the power relations between FTT groups and other entities.

This paper represents one output from a research project that particularly sought to build on the work of Nichols and Opal (2005) and Malpass et al. (2007) and to understand exactly how FTTs operate as place-based marketing networks.

METHODOLOGY.

The insights presented in this paper come from a research effort that applied “*Grounded Theory*”, a qualitative and interpretive methodology pioneered by Glaser & Strauss (1967). Although widely used across social science disciplines, grounded theory is comparatively under-used in marketing (Goulding, 1998). As a method it is considered particularly suitable for researching emerging phenomena for which pre-existing theory and rich data may be lacking (Charmaz, 2006). This was the case with FTT at the time this research project began. There were three elements of qualitative enquiry within the research process that aimed to understand the marketing dynamics of FTTs from the point of view of the ‘insiders’ developing them as marketing systems:

- a) ethnographic involvement over a three year period within a particular FTT group in Carmarthen and membership (with permission to record and research) of its Steering Group. This was recorded through ethnographic reflective journals supported by analysis of documents produced by the group;
- b) semi-structured interviews with 29 participants across 16 interview sessions (a mixture of individual interviews and small group discussions) drawn from the Steering Groups of FTTs from eleven different towns/cities including four from Wales (Cardiff, Swansea, Merthyr Tydfil and Carmarthen) and seven from England (Garstang, Hereford, Worcester, Keswick, Oundle, Millom and Bridgnorth). The respondents included both men and women, had an age range that went from university student to retiree, and included a variety of occupations including shop owner, gardener, vicar and teacher. The interviewing process began with Carmarthen (following on from the ethnography), Garstang (as the starting point of the movement) and Cardiff as the local group. Further towns and respondents involved were chosen through the recommendation of the first round of interviewees; and
- c) three days spent in the company of a founder of the FTT movement including interviews and a narrated tour of their town.

The interviews within the research followed Charmaz's (2006) recommendation of using very open questions beginning with phrases such as "*Tell me ...*", "*Could you describe ...*", "*What do you think ...*" and "*How did ...*". Respondents were encouraged to focus on their experience with the FTT rather than the Fairtrade movement more generally, but to relate that experience from their own perspective and in their own terms rather than being overly guided by very specific questions and terminology. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the journals and transcripts (totalling 110,432 words of data) were each immediately coded by hand to follow the key grounded theory principle of treating the collection and analysis of data as integrated and simultaneous (Charmaz, 2006).

One of the distinguishing features of grounded theory, compared to other methodologies, is the relationship between the literature that underpins a study, and the process of gathering and analysing data. In grounded theory, particularly if applied closely to its founders' prescriptions, the literature consulted and the research questions addressed should both be guided by the data that emerges from the field of study, rather than the other way around (as is normal in other methodologies). From a pragmatic point of view there are clearly limits to the extent to which a researcher can go into the field and ask appropriate questions without having selected and consulted some background literature. However at the beginning of this research project there was a very limited amount of literature dedicated specifically to FTTs. Therefore the research largely followed the recommended grounded theory approach of allowing the data that emerged from the empirical research to guide the choice of literatures and perspectives that were applied in order to understand it. Seeking to explain the marketing dynamics encountered within FTTs led the research into a range of marketing literatures relating to ethics and sustainability, and also into literatures from other disciplines such as geography, sociology or political ecology in an attempt to fully understand how FTTs operated as marketing systems. The data gathered was interrogated using a multi-stage coding process that sought to isolate common themes in the quest to generate new theory. The findings related below show how the gathering and analysis of empirical data, and the accompanying and evolving literature review, initially developed as we sought to answer the key grounded theory question of "*What is happening here?*" (Charmaz, 2006, p.168) within FTTs. They also highlight some of the particular 'people and place' perspectives that emerged.

FINDINGS - FTTS AS PLACES WHERE PEOPLE MATTER.

Figure 1. presents the initial conceptual framework for understanding FTTs as marketing systems that emerged from the empirical data gathered and the literatures that it directed the research to.

FIGURE 1. The Marketing Dynamics of Fairtrade Towns.



Beyond Fairtrade marketing.

The obvious starting point from which to understand FTTs as a marketing system is research relating to Fairtrade marketing. This is mostly concerned with consumers' response to Fairtrade offerings from the perspectives of ethical consumers/consumption (e.g. Low & Davenport, 2007; Malpass et al., 2007; Alexander & Nicholls 2006; Connolly & Shaw, 2006), sustainable consumption (e.g. Golding, 2009; Golding & Peattie, 2005; Jaffee, 2007)

and political consumerism (e.g. Barnett et al., 2011; Low & Davenport, 2005; Malpass et al., 2007; Micheletti, 2003). The relationship between these three discourses is sometimes complementary and sometimes competing. Low & Davenport (2005) recognise Fairtrade consumption as comprising all three, and Barnett et al. (2011) argue that consumption can be shaped by ethical, sustainable and political motives through the demonstration and process of caring for others and concerns for fairness. This theme of Fairtrade as an expression of caring for others was regularly highlighted by respondents:

I think it's promoting awareness of Fairtrade and justice in trade relationships. Pointing out to people questions about where our food comes from or where our clothes are made and the conditions they are produced in affect the livelihood of many people whose names you don't know and lives we are ignorant of. It's the first step towards a wider understanding of the need for justice in the trade relationships. Try to raise peoples' awareness and try to realise that their choices can affect the lives and livelihoods of lots of other people. Community Representative (Oundle)

Littler (2009), in an attempt to conceptualise these terms, argues that ethical consumption is the broader concept with the potential to 'capture' other narrower terms, but that they all describe the practice of 'consumer driven social action'. Although such concepts of consumer behaviour, and the research literature exploring them, are helpful to understand 'what is going on' within FTTs, they are not capable of generating a complete understanding. They are also the most heavily researched perspectives on Fairtrade in general. This research therefore focussed not on consumers themselves, but on those trying to influence them and other stakeholders within FTTs. This research sought to go beyond an ethical consumption based understanding of marketing processes within FTTs, which drew the research into considering other people, concepts and literatures in the search for a more complete understanding.

Consumer citizenship

An important 'people' orientated idea with relevance to Fairtrade is that of the citizen-consumer, in which the individual's role as a consumer within the market and as a citizen within society have become fused (McGregor, 2002). Consumer citizenship is recognised as contributing to a consumer culture that has developed from the republican tradition of collective citizenship, placing community obligations and responsibility at its core (Barnett et al., 2011). McGregor (2002) identifies three elements to citizenship being expressed through

our consumption. The first two: the social, expressing a sense of moral responsibility towards each other, and the political, showing willingness to partake actively in public life, are consistent with social and political values influencing the individual's ethical consumption decisions. The third element, the civic, takes the discussion further to consider peoples' involvement in the life and concerns of one's community. So whilst societal marketing broadened the view of the consumer from a component of a market to a member of society, the civic dimension of consumer citizenship places each consumer within their 'own' specific community.

This civic dimension to marketing and consumption within FTTs begins to shift the discussion beyond the collective consequences of multiple individual ethical consumption decisions to consider how people relate to their own communities as both citizens and consumers. In the case of FTTs, the role of the Steering Group members in promoting Fairtrade clearly combined these roles. They would seek to influence other consumers within their social circle, either by example or by acting as 'market mavens' (Walsh, Gwinner & Swanson, 2004):

I think with Fairtrade as a whole it's to continue to promote and to continue to purchase the products and continue encouraging other colleagues, family and friends to keep purchasing Fairtrade products, and not to let it slide. Student (Carmarthen)

They would also talk to local retailers or other organisations that didn't supply Fairtrade goods in a role as a 'disappointed' consumer:

...if you go in and say 'Oh have you got Fairtrade tea or coffee?' and they say 'No', I go – 'Wow, have you thought about stocking it?' Then I end up choosing something like a bottle of water, I think this does send a clear message to them that people are asking them for Fairtrade. It's definitely got impact I think. The one thing I always tell people is that if nothing else they should always ask for that because, it's amazing, if a few people ask, the owner might think 'Oh, why don't we stock that?'

Student Union (Cardiff)

Steering group members would also act in more general roles as citizens who promoted Fairtrade by holding and supporting events, talking in schools, lobbying organisations and a range of other activities that sought to increase local supply or the

consumption of other individuals or organisations. This reflects the range of ‘beyond consumption’ behaviours that Wheeler (2012) also noted amongst Fairtrade supporters.

Places and spaces of consumption

A consumer citizenship perspective and its concern with the civic and one’s own community (ie the community within which consumption occurs), extended the research’s focus beyond the conventional disciplines of marketing, management, consumer psychology and economics that tend to inform our understanding of Fairtrade marketing. The emphasis on consumer communities brings the discussion towards social geography and geographies of consumption in particular and concepts relating to places and spaces of consumption (NB. the relationship between ‘space’ and ‘place’ is too complex and contested to go into here, but for our purposes the notion of ‘space’ as a more general sense of location, and ‘place’ as somewhere specific that people give meaning and identity to will suffice). Space is important in terms of the space between producer and consumer within the Fairtrade supply chain as a physical or psychological distance that the FTT movement seeks to bridge or shrink:

It’s about, I think, linking ourselves to where our food and our products come from and ensuring that people that do produce these things, that we always take for granted, are getting good working conditions and trading conditions so that they can improve their lives in the same way we all want to improve our own lives.

Vicar (Hereford)

Space is also important in terms of finding locations to support Fairtrade sales, from increasing retailers’ shelf space to finding new retail spaces, from the ‘alternative high street’ (Low & Davenport, 2005) to churches. The consumer citizenship dimensions of FTT activities also lead to connections being forged with various elements of ‘place’, with local government, schools, universities, community groups, civil society organisations and public sector organisations all being asked to play a role in the marketing dynamic of Fairtrade as places of consumption (Alexander & Nicholls, 2006; Barnett et al., 2011; Malpass et al., 2007; Nicholls & Opal, 2005).

FTTs therefore represent “*geographies of consumption*” where “*relationships between people, things and places are constituted around the sale, purchase and use of goods and services*” (Mansvelt, 2005, p.1). This process can extend Fairtrade consumption within FTTs beyond the bounds of consumer engagement through what Malpass et al. (2007, p.639)

term “*Place jurisdiction*” whereby Fairtrade procurement policies ensure that Fairtrade consumption happens through choice editing “*whether or not workers, visitors or consumers consciously choose to participate, or even realize whether they are participating in the fairtrade-ness of the city*” (Malpass, 2007, p.639). The emphasis on such ‘passive consumption’ and efforts to increase sales by enrolling more places of consumption, has raised concerns that whilst it boosts sales, it is simultaneously disengaging people from the developmental message behind Fairtrade products (Low & Davenport, 2005).

Actor networks and social capital

Nicholls & Opal (2005) in developing the first substantive theoretical discussion of FTTs as marketing systems, adopt an actor network theory perspective. A key benefit of this approach is that it helps to understand the interactions between a range of ‘actors’ that includes producers, consumers and retailers, but also considers other types of stakeholder (like the FTT Steering Group), organisations (such as local government or local schools) and also non-human actors including products, labels, documents, places and entities such as the FTT accreditation standards. This approach encourages a broader understanding of both people and place within FTT marketing. Previous understandings of Fairtrade markets tended to place great emphasis on the role of the network in connecting the end ‘nodes’ of producers and consumers (e.g. Goodman, 2004). Considering FTTs as actor networks brings into focus the range of people and places involved at the consumer community end of the supply chain involved in building that connection.

Hutchens (2009, p.83) argues that Fairtrade as a movement has achieved rapid success by “*networking social networks to spread the fair trade message*”. She argues that the movement didn’t need to create new networks but instead has linked into other established networks that were already ‘in place’ and are connected to churches, schools, sympathetic businesses and other social movements. This process of exploiting existing social networks and social capital within the FTT steering group and making connections across organisations and groups was noted by Wheeler (2012) and was a recurrent theme within this research:

The first thing is perhaps to bring interested groups together because you can do so much more together than separately on your own little patch. So it brings a group together - there is strength in that and then, as a group, you would want to promote Fairtrade as much as you can from working together. Shop Owner (Cardiff)

What was clear from the empirical research is the importance of (local) social capital in developing and operating the FTT marketing network to promote Fairtrade consumption (Davies, 2009; Low & Davenport, 2007). Around (2006, p.20) notes that: “*The Fairtrade Towns initiative took off with remarkably few resources, outside a tremendous contribution of volunteers’ energy and time*”. It is the social capital of key people within the FTT (both Steering Group members and others that they are able to reach and influence) that provides the resource to drive the network. Familiarity and ‘trust’ represent the intangible assets that can be used to engage people who may have previously been disinterested or even sceptical about Fairtrade (Around, 2006; Talpin, 2009).

I think basically our Fairtrade Town organises and makes people aware of Fairtrade. To get people with energy to get involved is important because I think a lot of people see who we are and where we are from as a sort of religious or social image for example and they put their trust into that. So I think it’s a very sound basis to work from. Lecturer (Merthyr Tydfil)

Respondents also felt that their social capital and their ability to generate trust was particularly important when it came to countering any negative press coverage about Fairtrade that local people might have read. FTTs appear to gift the Fairtrade Movement with a support network that consists of various ‘in place’ actors/nodes who, when functioning together, prove capable of developing effective marketing communications and relationships with other citizens and a wide spectrum of organisations.

Place-based marketing

Nicholls & Opal’s (2005) actor network theory analysis of FTTs frames them as a form of place-based marketing, a theme developed further by Malpass et al.’s, (2007) exploration of FTT as “*Fairtrade urbanism*”. Although self-evidently a form of place-based marketing (since the place’s name is enshrined in each FTTs message), it is different to conventional place-based scholarship that emphasises destination marketing or place of origin appeals to consumers. However, in one sense Fairtrade shares some commonality with place of origin appeals, since both embed virtues linked to the place of production into the product consumed. In the case of FTT this involves an ethical augmentation of the product linked to the structuring and operation of its supply chain, rather than a change in the tangible product relating to the location and nature of the production process.

A distinctive aspect of FTTs as a form of place-based marketing, is that they often seek to leverage a local sense of identity relating to the town as a place in order to promote the Fairtrade message. Amongst the towns researched there were conscious attempts to link the local promotion of Fairtrade with their identities as ‘tourist’ towns, farming communities or as a capital city. The research also revealed this process going further in some towns to intertwine FTT status with the destination marketing they undertook promoting them as places for tourists and visitors. This involved highlighting the town’s status as a FTT in publications and websites designed to attract visitors to, and inform them about, the town. FTT marketing also was observed to share some similarities with local destination marketing in terms of the need to mobilise a network of diverse local stakeholders in order to market the place more effectively (Baggio, 2011).

Community-based marketing

A more complete understanding of the marketing dynamics of FTTs comes from understanding them in terms of ethically and sustainability orientated consumption that also integrates the civic orientation of political consumerism into a place-based marketing network. Such an understanding extends our consideration of consumption from individual responsibility to a wider collective place-based ideal, and frames FTTs as a set of marketing dynamics that operate, not just in specific places, but within specific communities. Ultimately the appeal to FTT citizens is not simply one of ethical consumption, but also one enhanced by elements of local identity and social solidarity.

Understanding FTTs as a form of community-based marketing is important because it emphasises the importance of people, and the interactions between people, that occur within communities. Previous consumer survey research has shown that the most influential contributor to the ethical consumer’s decision making is the recommendations of friends and colleagues (Arnold, 2009; Walsh, et al. 2004). Tallontire (2001) and Arnold (2009) agree that many ethical consumers show a natural distrust of information provided by companies and that instead they trust, listen to, and want to believe ‘people’ much more (Walsh, et al. 2004). Therefore ‘local’ information originating from the places of social settings, for example, family homes, peer groups, work, and many others are important to the credibility and power of marketing communications for ethical/sustainable goods and services (Lewis & Bridger, 2001; Tallontire, 2001). Since people are engaging in these within community discussions in a variety of roles, from a Fairtrade marketing perspective it goes beyond simple consumer

endorsements via word-of-mouth marketing. It could better be described as a process of social learning in which “*ordinary people*” (Lamb, 2008, p.42) encourage other local people and places to become more globally responsible through the act of Fairtrade consumption. In this way the FTT movement: “*grabs peoples’ interest and makes them feel empowered to do something about the world’s problems immediately, in their locality and without doing anything extraordinary*” (Talpin, 2009, p.13). This reflects Low and Davenport’s (2006) assessment of FTT’s ability to engage people beyond mere consumption and instead to actively champion the Fairtrade message by using their multiple and overlapping identities within their communities. These identities include those of consumers and also of workers, parents and members of community/faith groups. As Barnett et al. (2011, p.180) note, people participate in FTTs, not as abstract consumers, but as rounded people who are “*Christians, or socialists, or teachers, or friends.*”

DISCUSSION – FAIRTRADE TOWNS CONNECTING PEOPLE

What FTTs help to add to, or reinforce within, the Fairtrade marketing agenda, is a vital sense of it being about real people in real places, and not just about abstract concepts like prices, markets, justice and ethics. Whatmore & Thorne (1997, p.301), when discussing Fairtrade networks, argue that: “*What is analytically distinctive, however, is how they strengthen relationships amongst formally ‘passive’ actants in commercial networks; the producer and consumer*”. One of the key things that FTTs can do is to take the people at the two ends of the supply chain, and make them more engaged, active and connected. In conventional markets neither end is very engaged with the supply chain as a whole. The end consumer does not look behind the marketing mix offered to them by the marketers, and the producer does not look beyond the commodity buyer as their immediate customer. Fairtrade marketing allows the consumer to see back down the supply chain in order to understand the lives of the producers behind the commodity, who in turn get to tell their stories to the end consumer, if nothing else through the labels and marketing materials of Fairtrade products. As Zadek, Lingayah and Forester (1998) frame it, the use of social labels such as Fairtrade can change the marketing process from acting as a mirror that reflects back the consumer’s own values and identity to become a window through which they can view and understand the lives of producers. FTTs have shown the potential to go a step further to actually bring together the two ends of the supply chain. This happened most notably through the use of ‘supplier visits’ within FTTs, particularly during Fairtrade Fortnight. These were viewed across a range of FTTs as a powerful tool for promoting Fairtrade within the local community:

We had a partner from overseas who was able to share with us what a difference Fairtrade makes to people on the ground. You know it wasn't just an idea in the sky, it was real, and there was this person there saying Fairtrade is making a difference to us. That is always a good influence because people can see then that what you are doing is worth doing. NGO Worker (Carmarthen)

CONCLUSIONS FAIRTRADE TOWNS - A PEOPLE PERSPECTIVE

The experience of the FTTs within this study confirms the findings of Barnett et al. (2011) and Wheeler (2012) that participation in FTTs by consumers is much more than just an act of ethical consumerism. FTTs in this study demonstrate themselves as arenas of consumer citizenship that operate beyond the traditional marketing paradigm and the emphasis on promoting to individuals. They make a difference by developing and promoting ideas and activities that exist in the everyday actions that occur within communities and across the variety of organisations and places that exist within them. FTTs help to drive Fairtrade forward as a form of social business by making it about people and by helping to personalise the Fairtrade agenda and promoting it through the social networks that exist within communities, in a way that reflects and resonates with the community as a place. They can also bring producer and consumer communities together in a way that goes far beyond our understanding of ethical consumption and the principle of considering 'distant others'. Just as marketing, since the early 20th century, has acted to close the market distance that emerged between consumer and producer, so FTTs in the new millennium are bridging the human distance that has also emerged between people in producer and consumer communities. To give the last word to Bruce Crowther, Chair of Garstang FTT and the original driving force behind the movement:

It's about people, it's about friendship, it's about real people, and that's what's at the heart of it all.

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